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ABSTRACT

Not much research has been done on the factors that affect schools' willingness to undertake school-improvement efforts with the assistance of outside organizations. To address this lack, staff of the Quest project at AEL, Inc. conducted a multi-method exploratory study of issues considered significant to schools' engagement with reform. Focus group interviews of February 1999 Quest conference participants (N=41) were conducted, and phone interviews were made to teachers less engaged or not involved in the Quest network (N=26). Study participants were also asked to complete the Quest Engagement Survey form (N=58). Responses were numerically coded and analyzed statistically. Survey responses indicated that personal beliefs about education and change were most significant to both beginning and ongoing participation. Focus-group and individual interviews suggested that building-level administrative support for participation had been most important to both initial and sustained involvement. These and other findings suggest that organizations supporting school improvement ought to consider ongoing needs assessment as a means to target support and assistance that remains relevant to participating schools as reform continues. This report concludes with 39 references and an appendix containing a Quest brochure and Framework for Continuous School Improvement. (RT)

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To Continue, Press On:
Sustaining Continuous School Improvement

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INTRODUCTION

School improvement is increasingly viewed as an ongoing and comprehensive process. Recent legislation has encouraged the adoption of such a view, with the 1998 appropriation of $150 million by Congress to states for allocation to schools undertaking research-based schoolwide reform programs through the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program (CSRD). Earlier, in 1994, Congress altered regulations to allow schools receiving Title I funds, with free and reduced lunch 50% and above, to use such funds for whole school improvement (American Institutes for Research, 1999).

The reform models mentioned in the legislation instituting CSRD encompass a variety of approaches to reform, from skill-based, to comprehensive, to processual. In addition, the models vary in their degree of prescriptiveness. All claim to be based upon research and to have evidence of some positive impact. Yet investigations of and prototypes for school improvement extend far beyond the models forwarded in CSRD legislation: Contemporary literature on school improvement has roots in the school effectiveness literature of the 1970s and early 80s (Levine & Lezotte, 1995).

Much current research suggests that the interplay between school cultural and structural conditions significantly affects how change at a particular school will be greeted (e.g., Newmann & Wehlage, 1996). They contend that if cultural characteristics, such as commitment to high expectations, support for inquiry, and caring relationships, intersect with structural factors, such as time for staff development and freedom from excessive organizational constraints, school reform will proceed more smoothly. Along with these intersections, school leadership must be an integral part of improvement efforts (van der Bogert, 1998), and collaboration among the many stakeholders in school communities must be pursued (Sarason & Lorentz, 1998). Fullan and Miles (1994) additionally suggest that those involved in improvement must recognize that it is a journey, one filled with ambiguity, uncertainty, and risk, rather than a scripted, easily implemented recipe.

While an abundance of education research has focused on what practices and conditions contribute to continuous school improvement (e.g., American Institutes for Research, 1999; Barth, 1990; Fullan, 1991; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994; Newmann, 1996; Sergiovanni, 1994), relatively less attention has been given to the reasons schools are willing or able to maintain their engagement with a particular strategy or program over time. For example, Slavin, Dolan, and Madden (1994, p. 30) argue that, "To survive the inevitable changes of superintendents, principals, teachers, and district policies, school staffs need to feel that there is a valued and important group beyond the confines of their district that cares and supports what they are doing." Yet the very participation of a school in such a group beyond their district may depend substantially on the moral and financial support of those within the district.

Staff of the Quest project at AEL were especially interested in this issue after a year and a half of nurturing a continuous school improvement network. Based upon principles of inquiry, collaboration, and action research, Quest (Walsh & Sattes, 2000) proposes to support and investigate ongoing school improvement efforts through twice-yearly conferences (which staff

renamed rallies), summer symposia, a Scholars program, visits to participating schools, communication via listserv and mailings, and the creation of a Quest network of schools (see Appendix A). As the project evolved between 1997 and 1999 (Howley-Rowe, 1998a-g; 1999a-c), Quest staff observed that some school teams attended project events consistently, contributed frequently to network activities, and remained in regular contact. Other schools continued their involvement, but with less intensity, while a third group of schools chose not to maintain their participation with the network.

A review of the literature suggested that a variety of factors at the school level and at the network or project level impact a school's capacity to sustain involvement over time in a reform effort facilitated by an external agency or consultant. At the school level, logistical factors such as lack of time to attend project events or to implement improvement strategies (D'Amico & Corbett, 1988; Louis & Miles, 1990), difficulty acquiring substitute coverage during teacher attendance at events (Selzter & Himley, 1995), scheduling conflicts (Education Commission of the States, 1996), and lack of funding (Useem et al., 1995) are impediments to ongoing participation. These fundamental, practical considerations appear to bear considerably on a school's ability to become and remain involved in an externally facilitated change process.

Several factors associated with leadership also appear to be important to a school's continued involvement with a reform effort. Turnover in leadership threatens continuity, for instance (Education Commission of the States, 1996), as does inconsistent principal participation in project efforts (Goldman & Dunlap, 1990). A building leader's vision (Slavin, 1998) and the district stance vis a vis the reform (Cuttance, 1994; D'Amico & Corbett, 1988; Useem et al., 1995) also are found to be important factors in sustaining reform momentum. Schoolwide consensus for the initiative is likewise noted as a factor significant to the livelihood of reform endeavors (D'Amico & Corbett, 1988; Honig, 1994; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1994; Louis & Miles, 1990; Slavin, Dolan, & Madden, 1994). Citing an evaluation of eight schools participating in the Essential Schools network, Honig reports that "where reform did not take, no real consensus for change was initially developed; indeed, many teachers who gave lip service to the reforms at the start became hostile when changes threatened to affect them directly" (1994, p. 794). Thus, schoolwide agreement to undertake change impacts personal willingness to tolerate the ambiguity and additional work associated with implementation.

Other issues influencing the success of reform include adequacy of information given school staff about the improvement project (Goldman & Dunlap, 1990), relevance of the reform to the school (D'Amico & Corbett, 1988; Slavin, 1998), and personal beliefs about education and change (Cuttance, 1994). Some researchers suggest that the subjective experiences and perspectives of those involved in reform are vital to its viability (Fullan, 1991); others contend that individuals confront particular concerns as they progress through implementation (Hord et al., 1987). The history of prior reform efforts within a school is also forwarded as an important variable (D'Amico & Corbett, 1988).

School structural issues are additional factors important to the success of school reform. Reform at the high school level may confront greater challenges than reform undertaken at elementary schools because of "high school organizational complexity" (Useem et al., 1995). Put another way, the degree of interdependence between grade-level groups, departments, or teams plays a role in how well a reform effort is received and supported over time (D'Amico & Corbett, 1988).

Some of the literature suggests that the success of school improvement work depends as much on characteristics of the particular reform or approach as on school factors. Moreover, the ways a reform coincides with a school's goals, values, and readiness for change significantly impact its longevity. D'Amico and Corbett (1988), for instance, argue that any improvement initiative must address one of a school district's two highest priorities if it is to succeed. They elaborate that implementation of reform is the result of the interaction between the conditions of local context and the processes used to carry out improvement efforts. Similarly, Slavin (1998) contends that change may not take place because of a mismatch between the type of reform and a school's readiness for it.

Nonetheless, Quest staff found relatively little research on the factors that impact schools' willingness to undertake school improvement efforts with the assistance of outside consultants or organizations. Nor was there much research concerning the variables influencing schools' involvement over time in such efforts. Other questions of interest were whether respondents from elementary and high schools found various factors of more or less importance to their schools' participation, and whether those from schools of varying degrees of involvement with the project also made different assessments.

Quest staff decided to conduct an exploratory, multimethod study of issues the literature suggested were significant to schools' engagement with reform by sampling participants in the Quest network for continuous improvement. This report describes the study and its findings.

METHODS

Using several data sources in order to corroborate theses is what Brewer and Hunter (1989) call "multimethod research" or "triangulation." This approach posits that the strengths of each method will compensate for the weaknesses in others, ultimately providing a more complete account of that being studied. Therefore, a variety of data was collected throughout this study to provide a fuller account of the factors assisting or impeding schools' participation in the Quest network.

First, focus group interviews were conducted with participants at each of two rallies convened in February 1999. Only those network members who had attended at least one prior Quest event were asked to participate in the focus groups; project staff hypothesized that those who were attending a Quest event for the first time might have less knowledge about the interview issues. There was a total of 147 individuals in the network who had attended at least one project event before February. New attendees participated in an orientation session while more veteran members were interviewed via focus groups.

The focus group methodology was chosen because it would allow staff to gather a variety of perspectives from a larger number of network members than they might obtain during phone interviews. In addition, the presence of network participants at the rallies made the facilitation of focus groups all the more efficient. Ultimately, those who participated in the focus group interviews comprised a convenience sample of those individuals from moderately to highly engaged schools who were present at the February 1999 rallies (N=41). No attempts were made to contact the remaining 49 team members from the same schools who did not attend, as project staff thought the convenience sample was sufficient for exploratory purposes.

Three focus groups were conducted between approximately 3:00 and 4:00 p.m. on February 15, 1999, at the Patrick Henry Hotel in Roanoke, Virginia, during a Quest high school network rally that six school teams attended. One focus group consisted of five building administrators, while the remaining two groups of six and seven participants included teachers, parents, and students. Each focus group was led by a Quest staff member trained in focus group facilitation, who used a predesigned interview protocol.

Three more focus groups were held between approximately 3:20 p.m. and 4:00 p.m. on February 22, 1999, at the Wyndham Garden Hotel in Lexington, Kentucky, during a Quest elementary school network rally that six school teams attended. As in the earlier round of focus groups, one consisted exclusively of five school building administrators. The other two groups, of nine each, included teachers and parents. Again, the focus group interviews were conducted by Quest staff trained in focus group facilitation using a predesigned interview protocol. A total of 41 Quest network members were interviewed via the six focus groups conducted in February 1999.

However, those network members who attended the February rallies tended to hail from schools that had been relatively committed to and engaged with the project over time. Quest staff also hoped to understand the perspectives of those who had been less engaged with, or had dropped out of, the network (N=57). During the spring and early summer of 1999, therefore, project staff conducted telephone interviews with members of recidivist Quest teams and with network participants whose schools had not sent teams to the February rallies. Two weeks before phone interviewing commenced, project staff mailed all prospective interviewees a one-page letter describing the study, requesting their participation, and providing contact information. Twenty-six of the 57 individuals in this subgroup participated in the telephone interviews.

Survey data also were collected from network members, former and present, who had attended at least one project event before the February 1999 rallies. Attendees meeting this criterion at both rallies were requested to complete the Quest Engagement Survey following the focus groups. The survey consisted of 24 diverse factors hypothesized to be important to schools' involvement in a school improvement network such as Quest. These factors were based upon variables suggested by the literature as well as several proposed by Quest staff. Respondents were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert-type scale how important each factor was, first, to their school's initial decision to become involved with Quest, and second, to their school's sustained involvement with the network. Anchor points on the scale were 1 (*very unimportant*) and 5 (*very important*), and response options included a *don't know* reply.

The surveys were collected by focus group facilitators following each focus group. Thirty-nine surveys were returned from the total 41 focus group interviewees. Phone interviewees from recidivist or less engaged schools were also asked to complete the survey. Quest staff offered to administer the survey over the phone or to fax the survey for respondents to complete on their own. Later in the interviewing cycle, when school was no longer in session, respondents were offered the additional options of receiving the survey by mail or e-mail. Nineteen surveys were completed by the 26 respondents who participated in the phone interviews. Thus, a total of 58 surveys were completed and returned. If the total sample is conceived to be those who participated in the focus groups (N=41) or in the telephone interviews (N=26), the survey return rate would be 88%. More conservatively, including focus group participants (N=41) and all those Quest staff attempted to contact by telephone (N=57), the return rate would be 59%.

In sum, 67 Quest network members participated in the study, representing 46% of the total 147 network members. Forty-one participated in focus groups, and 26 in telephone interviews. Of the total study participants, 58 completed the survey, 39 of whom were also focus group participants and 19 of whom were also phone interviewees.

Following data collection, five of the six focus group interviews were transcribed. The sixth focus group accidentally was not tape recorded, although the facilitator wrote detailed notes during the interview. These were typed for use during data analysis. Quest staff recorded responses received during each telephone interview on an interview protocol form. Replies were

later entered into a WordPerfect file. Focus group data were analyzed by theme using NUD*IST software, and telephone interviews were analyzed by question and theme manually. Each theme was coded, and the occurrence of each theme was tabulated. Survey data were entered into an SPSS database, and statistics were analyzed using the same software.

Descriptive statistics for the entire were generated using SPSS. *T* tests were also conducted, although it should be noted that the assumptions of these statistical tests were violated in this study. The sample was not random, nor was it assumed that the data were drawn from a normally distributed population or that the samples had homogenous variances. Such tests of statistical significance were used in an exploratory fashion, as the purpose for Quest staff of conducting them in this study is to identify differences for future, more rigorous exploration. Finally, effect sizes were calculated to ascertain the practical significance of statistically significant findings.

There were several limitations to this study. First, response rates for participants from schools that had dropped out of or were less engaged with the Quest network were lower than those from schools that were moderately to highly involved. More engaged schools sent teams to the February rallies at which data for this study were collected, enhancing their response rates. Data collection from less engaged or uninvolved schools not in attendance at the February rallies was hampered by the challenges of phone interviews: Reaching teachers at school was difficult given their classroom commitments, some potential interviewees did not return phone calls, and home phone numbers were unavailable for 21 individuals from less involved or recidivist schools. The lack of home phone numbers particularly impacted response rates as much phone interviewing took place at the end of the school year.

A related limitation concerns sampling. Although convenience samples and smaller samples are appropriately used for exploratory studies, their validity and generalizability are restricted (Brewer & Hunter, 1989). In other words, although the sample for this study was drawn from the population of Quest network participants, and may be generalizable to other Quest members, it may not represent the perspectives of educators involved in other reform endeavors because of the use of nonprobability sampling techniques. On the other hand, and appropriately for an exploratory investigation, the sample was drawn from a theoretically defined universe—school community members engaged in school reform work. Thus, as Brewer and Hunter argue, data from this sample can be used to generalize by synecdoche as "a claim that the essential features of the larger social unit are reproduced in microcosm within the smaller social unit, and that by studying them in micro we might make inferences about the macrostructure of which they are a part" (p. 123). Nonetheless, statistical generalization is compromised in this study.

In addition, although it might have been revealing to investigate, for instance, differences between highly engaged elementary and high schools, or between least engaged elementary and high schools, such an examination would have rendered cell sizes too small to have much validity.

FINDINGS

Focus Group Findings

Network participants in attendance at the February 1999 rallies who had participated in at least one prior project event were asked during focus group interviews what factors were most important to their school's initial involvement in the Quest network and to their school's sustained involvement (see Appendix B). Probes on the focus group protocol requested that respondents differentiate between school and Quest factors. Analysis of the focus group transcriptions reveals that several themes appear important to both elementary and high school respondents.

By far, the theme most frequently mentioned by interviewees was the centrality of administrative support to their initial and sustained involvement in the Quest project. Participants reported that often the school building administrator or principal, rather than teachers or other school community members, initially noted the relevance of Quest to current school endeavors: Five high school and eight elementary school focus group interviewees noted that building administrators had directed or suggested involvement with the network. As two focus group interviewees described it,

> "Well, Dr. Baldwin[1] just presented to the site-based council one night when we met saying that she had been contacted by AEL and she thought it would be a really good involvement for us. At that time, we still had to do the school improvement and all those plans and she thought it would help us in writing all those." [elementary school participant]

> "I believe it was our improvement plan and continuously looking for new ways to improve our school. And we were asked if we wanted to participate. She didn't just decide yes, we're going . . . . The principal did present it as a good opportunity to go and learn some new things perhaps, or new strategies to improve our school. And . . . it did go along with our school improvement plan, also." [elementary school participant]

Rather than making explicit the relevance of the project to school efforts, central office administrators were reported to have simply directed staff to attend the first Quest rally or presented Quest as a professional development opportunity of which they might take advantage. Focus group interviewees noted 11 times that a central office administrator had facilitated their school's initial participation in the project.

> "It was our superintendent. He just asked me to go as president of student council and he figured that he would take me along. He said I could see problems he couldn't see and that maybe we could fix them. Fix problems that he couldn't." [high school participant]

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[1]All names used in this report are pseudonyms in order to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of those participating in the Quest network.

"Our [involvement] was directed from the central office that this was a great program that our school should get involved in and it was very important knowledge on the first Quest trip by us who were coming as to what Quest was or what it was about and I was really quite surprised to find out it was a long commitment because I don't think we really knew what Quest was other than someone in our central office said, 'This is a good thing. You need to go.'" [high school participant]

"We had an interim superintendent again who was involved with AEL and really showed a lot of concern for our system even though he came there as a short-time superintendent, and he got us involved." [elementary school participant]

"Mr. Young—I think he made the decision and told faculty who he wants to be involved . . . . So I think it was more or less the principal's decision." [elementary school participant]

Similarly, both elementary and high school participants reported that continued and active central office and building administrator support for involvement in the Quest project was vital to their school's ongoing participation. The importance of central office support was noted four times by elementary and four times by high school interviewees. Overwhelmingly, however, respondents thought that the support of the building-level administrator was most fundamental to their school's continued involvement with Quest. Mention of this theme was made 11 times by elementary respondents and 19 times by their high school counterparts. Participants put their perspectives in these ways:

"I feel like right now [our involvement with Quest] is really high because our principal is really actively involved, so therefore if a principal is actively involved and you know you have your school that's going to follow." [elementary school participant]

"I think the people at the administrative level are absolutely critical, because a student or a parent or even a teacher probably can't make it go once it gets back home. And so I know we need our administrative person, and we've got one with a lot of energy now, and I think it's going to make a huge difference." [high school participant]

"I think the teacher can keep it alive but maybe couldn't have made it really push. But having a committed administrator there is just really important." [high school participant]

"If you don't have the administrator, you have nothing at all." [high school participant]

Seven of the comments suggesting the significance of building-level administrative support for sustained involvement in the Quest network also referred to such administrators' willingness to secure or broker funding, released time, and substitute coverage to enable participant attendance at project meetings. For instance,

"I think what makes it easy for us to be involved is that our principal is totally in agreement and dedicated to the situation, and so that's never a question as far as freeing time to attend meetings or expenses or whatever it takes. She thinks it's a good thing, and we are committed to do this." [elementary school participant]

"I think it really has a lot to do with our staff and the fact that they can find money. Our principal can find money in places that we have no clue. We do not ask. We're just glad the money's there and she pays for us to come and it really helps. Because if we had to pay for it out of our pockets, I really don't think as many people would be able to come." [elementary school participant]

"Again, I think resourcefulness [is important to involvement]. I think, you know, having the principal back this really makes things possible. Because as I see it, and I'm on the outside, it costs the school money to be involved and all the teachers who are here . . . had to find money to find substitutes that are there with our children today and tomorrow. And just being here . . . so, to stay at the hotel and the food and everything . . . " [elementary school participant]

"While we can't get [our principal] to come [to Quest events], he's willing for us to go, and he's very supportive, and he helps us try to find funding and substitutes and all those kind of things." [high school participant]

Eleven comments also indicated the necessity of schoolwide consensus for involvement in Quest, including teachers, parents, and students, to the success of continued participation and to implementation efforts. Three participants reported that their school communities supported their affiliation with Quest, which in turn enhanced their schools' ongoing participation in the network. Asked what helped to sustain his school's involvement in the project, one elementary school participant replied, "Probably the active participation from all the faculty and staff and parents that we have there along with the principal." The remainder reported less schoolwide agreement about involvement, which they saw as impeding the success of their Quest work. As one elementary network interviewee phrased it, "If teachers have not really been involved, it's been hard for them to understand what we're doing."

A total of nine comments were offered about the importance of funding to participation in a network such as Quest. One high school focus group interviewee specifically noted the importance of funding received from AEL to support continued participation in the project: "The other factor is the money provided by AEL. If we didn't have the money, I wouldn't be here." Similarly, one participant noted that a reform model implemented at her high school provided financial assistance: "That's something that our High Schools That Work team has that we [Quest team] do not have . . . . They've got the money from the High Schools That Work that's dedicated . . . just to the sub days and planning days."

Fifteen comments indicated that, while administrative support for attendance at Quest events was important, at least equally important was active administrative support for the school improvement endeavors Quest team members learned of during project events and intended to implement at their schools. Three high school interviewees, for instance, reported:

> "[The administrators are] all for us coming down and coming back with new ideas and putting it to work at the school, and when we get back it's pretty much left up to us to do all the work."

> "I think we've got an overall desire to improve, yet I'm not so sure that's driven by the administrators. It's that we, as Quest members, continue to go in and say, 'Hey, what are we doing on Quest lately?' or something like that. We kind of prod her along. Not that she's against Quest or anything like that. She just doesn't have the time for it."

> "And I think that's a blind spot for administrators, because they send staff to meetings like this and expect us to come back and do things, and they don't realize the position that puts us in since we don't have the authority. My administrator has said to me, 'Well, why didn't you take that and run?' I couldn't run. How?"

Similarly, an elementary school participant reported,

> "Our principal does her very best to motivate and inform and implement as many things as possible, and the teachers that have been to the Quest rallies, we've gone back and tried to share with colleagues and then implement things that we have chosen or found most valuable to use in our classroom." [elementary school participant]

Among the themes most often mentioned by focus group participants was the relevance of Quest goals to school goals, or the ways Quest coincided with particular school efforts. Participants reported that such relevance was necessary *both* to their schools' initial and continued engagement with the network. This theme was mentioned seven times by high school interviewees and 14 times by their elementary school counterparts. One respondent thought the relevance of Quest to school undertakings indicated redundancy:

> "It's been a reoccurring [sic]—I don't want to say it's a problem. It's an occurrence that because we have High Schools That Work and the School Improvement Plan and Quest, we have school improvement going on in the school and it seems like the same things that we're doing for this we can also include in doing this in the other projects that we have going on at the time." [high school participant]

But other focus group participants who spoke about how school and Quest goals overlapped assessed such relevance positively, noting its significance to their involvement with the project. Several quotes are illustrative of this point.

"I would say that through Quest we have been able to use a lot of their ideals to enhance ours and to assess ours to see if we're going in the right direction and then I think as Sally said, too, I mean they overlapped and it's just like a support system so you're able to accomplish two things at once while you're doing whatever type of school improvement you're doing." [high school participant]

"Occasion had something to do with it, but then also we were at the process—just starting the process of accreditation. Getting re-accredited in School Renewal Process, so we used Quest as a vehicle to help out with that." [high school participant]

"When I think about our school . . . we're constantly trying to improve ourselves and this is just an outlet in order to do that. I mean, it's the best one I think that we've found to help us continuously improve ourselves because we all want to be the best we can be and AEL helps us do that." [elementary school participant]

"I think that it was our parent program and it just kind of fell into what we were already doing instead of something new that we were . . . it was just kind of . . . we were already doing it and we could just continue." [elementary school participant]

Another theme mentioned often was the ambiguity participants felt as they began their involvement with Quest. Twelve comments were made about this theme, although it should be noted that 10 were forwarded during one high school focus group in which interviewees had a spontaneous discussion on the topic. Eight of the comments indicated that participants felt the information they received initially about Quest was unclear.

"I was really quite surprised to find out it was a long commitment, because I don't think we really knew what Quest was other than someone in our central office said, "This is a good thing you need to go to." [high school participant]

"I knew it was about school improvement, and that was about it." [high school participant]

The remaining four of these comments noted continuing challenges Quest team members faced in communicating about Quest to their school colleagues. For example,

"And that's partly our responsibility and partly AEL's for not giving them that [information] initially, I guess. That if they knew more about it, and I think especially if they knew more about that it's not just a bunch of research, but it's actually ideas being shared and that kind of stuff, I think there'd be more teachers involved." [high school participant]

"But the paper you gave us today, the two pages on Quest, we should have had day one, because it's been unbelievably difficult to explain to parents, to explain to students, to my student government . . . you know, what this is, because there hasn't been anything that says, you know, what it is." [high school participant]

Mention was made nine times of the difficulty in managing competing priorities in order to continue participation in the Quest network. These priorities ranged from implementation of various reform initiatives to regular school duties such as teaching and grading.

> "We have staff development that we have to do and school improvement that we have to do in Tennessee, and sometimes the feeling is this is in conflict." [elementary school participant]
>
> "What would get in the way of our involvement would be the programs that we have still require a lot of time. For example, our after-school program." [elementary school participant]
>
> "We had difficulty trying to find other teachers that would come with us because we had just went to the block [schedule] this year, and no one wanted to leave their class for two days." [high school participant]

A related concern was the time away from school that attendance at Quest events required. Mention was made of this theme six times by focus group respondents. Participants reported that their attendance depended on, as one put it, a "sacrifice" in both professional and personal time. A high school administrator said that taking time to attend Quest events created a rift in morale: "It becomes a morale issue for those teachers who are left behind to deal with things in our absence. When we get back there will be morale problems. 'If you hadn't gone to Quest . . .'"

Time to reflect on their progress, formulate plans, and implement improvement efforts was another theme of some importance to seven focus group respondents. Participants reported that while attendance at Quest meetings was affirming and useful, the time needed to implement school improvement strategies learned of from Quest was sometimes an impediment to their continued involvement. Asked what factors hindered school participation in Quest, one elementary school respondent put it this way:

> "Time within your school day for faculty to get together and talk about issues and do real collegial sharing and discussion of the pros and cons of a particular program or something that Quest may have brought up and that you really need the faculty as a whole to understand because there are just two or three of us maybe that saw the Interview Design. Now we need to take it back to our faculty . . . . When you have a school day that is extremely long and complex and there's no time for the whole faculty to get together except once a month after school. So I think that the time is a critical factor."

Eight comments were made about the networking with colleagues facilitated by Quest participation. Four participants noted that the potential of such opportunities to meet and exchange ideas with other educators informed their schools' first decision to become involved in the project. "I saw it as a wonderful opportunity to engage . . . with a larger group and to get ideas from other schools," reported one elementary network member. Four other respondents noted that the networking opportunities helped to sustain their engagement in the project. As one such elementary

school participant put it, "It's kind of give[n] us confidence to know that other schools are wanting all over the areas, wanting to improve our schools, and it's just give[n] us some ideas hearing from the other schools."

Seven elementary school participants reported that prior or current involvement with AEL facilitated their initial or continued participation with the Quest project. Five noted that the quality of their earlier experiences with AEL services convinced them to join Quest.

> "I think we're involved because past work with AEL has been so successful and knowing the people and the quality of work . . . when there was an opportunity to do something else we jumped at it."

> "We got involved because we'd had such great experiences with AEL and knew that anything AEL wanted to do was going to be top drawer because of the quality of the people and the sophistication and professional integrity of the organization."

Two others mentioned their involvement with another program facilitated by Quest staff, QUILT (Questioning and Understanding to Improve Learning and Thinking). However, their comments do not clearly elaborate the relationship between participation in QUILT and Quest. Asked to describe their level of involvement with Quest, they replied,

> "We've done the QUILT program and that has kept us abreast of everything that's going on, and we have had staff developments on QUILT . . . . So, we are involved, very involved."

> "One of the people . . . involved in the development of the QUILT program, is an administrator at our school . . . . Certain ones are going to be going for the QUILT training and then coming back and training our staff as professional development this summer and to implement that into our daily working with the higher level questioning. And so I'd say we were very much involved."

These comments might be interpreted in at least two ways. First, perhaps the respondents meant to suggest that their additional contact with Quest staff through QUILT enhanced their commitment to or knowledge about Quest. Or, maybe the participants had elided the two projects conceptually.

Two elementary and five high school focus group interviewees reported the importance of scheduling to their continued participation in Quest, six citing their inability to attend events at particular points throughout the school year, such as during the administration of final exams. A seventh participant, from the high school network, spoke of the timing of project gatherings as contributing to momentum: "The timing of the conferences has been important, because as soon as you kind of lapse back into that dull lull, it's almost like there's another conference, and you renew your energy."

Yet another theme of some significance concerned a school community's willingness to accept feedback and implement change. Six comments were offered to suggest that involvement in Quest required a commitment to explore avenues of growth, and that for those interested in continuous improvement, change rendered with the support of Quest helped sustain school engagement in the network. Asked to describe what factors helped her school remain involved with the project, one elementary network participant responded,

> "I would say a willingness to accept change, because when you're committed to Quest, things are going to happen. And if you are reluctant to change or drag your feet this is not for you. But if you're willing to change . . . and when you're ready to change, then it's going to be an alive environment, a moving, good thing."

Likewise, a high school network respondent reported,

> "You wouldn't participate in this, I don't think, unless you were willing to acknowledge any fault that you might have. You know, be willing to make improvements. I don't think that you would participate in this as a school if you weren't willing to do that to some degree."

Comments made by three elementary and three high school network focus group participants intimate the ways affirmation received through Quest promotes ongoing participation in the project. Three participants spoke of affirmation in terms of "renewal" and "revitalization." The three remaining comments discuss affirmation in terms of using Quest staff as a sounding board for ideas or as "critical friends." For example, an elementary participant said,

> "One of the things that I've found helps us stay involved is that the AEL staff has been so supportive and affirming. The co-venture was great, and to have people with the expertise and the experience of the AEL people saying that what we're doing is right and it's good and it's unique . . ."

Six comments, four from elementary and two from high school network members, were offered concerning the logistical difficulties to participation in Quest faced by small schools. Practical issues included lack of resources to support participation, challenges in "fielding a team," and the burden of maintaining many projects with few staff.

Other themes were forwarded by focus group participants with relatively less frequency. For instance, five participants discussed the importance of Quest as a resource for research and strategies to their schools' participation in the network, and four of their personal motivation to attend project events. The ways Quest encourages development of a Quest school team contributed to their schools' sustained participation, according to four respondents. Three comments suggested that the overlap of school and Quest philosophy or vision contributed to involvement; three others cited previous positive reform efforts.

Themes mentioned only twice included the importance of personal relationships with Quest staff, the inclusiveness of the Quest network, personal availability to attend project meetings, and the ways Quest participation intersected with personal growth.

Table 1 summarizes the themes most frequently mentioned by focus group participants as important to their schools' initial and sustained involvement in Quest.

Table 1
Important Factors Influencing Quest Involvement: Summary of Most Frequently Mentioned Focus Group Themes

Theme	Initial	Sustained
Building-level administrative support for involvement	13	30
Relevance of Quest to the school	21	
Active building-level administrative support for school improvement projects	0	15
Ambiguity about Quest	8	4
Central office support for involvement in Quest	11	8
Schoolwide consensus for Quest involvement	0	11
Funding for involvement in Quest	0	9
Other priorities competing with Quest involvement	0	9
Prior involvement with AEL	4	4

Interview Findings

Twenty-six individuals from four low and five moderately engaged Quest schools participated in telephone interviews conducted by trained Quest staff. Respondents were asked via a structured interview protocol (see Appendix C) to describe what factors at their school and of Quest had contributed to their schools' initial involvement in the network. Respondents from schools that had left the Quest network were requested to describe what school and Quest factors had hindered their schools' continued participation in Quest, while schools maintaining their involvement in the project were asked to describe what school and Quest factors had helped and hindered their ongoing participation.

Eight of the 26 interview respondents provided replies consisting of two or more themes when asked what school factors had been most important in determining their schools' initial participation in Quest. The remainder offered replies containing one theme. Eight respondents reported that their schools' initial involvement had been most influenced by the interest in exploring

the potential relevance of Quest to their schools. "We are a progressive school always looking for new programs," said one participant. Another respondent noted that her large school had been "trying to look at ways of improving things for the entire school population." Seven respondents indicated that the relevance of Quest to their schools had been apparent and influenced their decision to become involved. Of these, six noted specific areas to which they hoped Quest would be relevant: Two mentioned parent involvement, one community involvement, one work with small schools, one consolidation issues, and one concern with test scores.

Five responses indicated that the principal had initiated the schools' initial participation in Quest. Four respondents reported that initially they had very little information about the project. Initial involvement was facilitated by the district office, according to the three respondents from one school. Two respondents reported that they did not know what school factors had impacted their schools' first association with Quest. Two others said prior experience with AEL had influenced their initial decision. One reply each suggested that networking opportunities, faculty willingness to participate, availability of funding to attend, and curiosity had been important factors impacting schools' initial involvement in Quest. One response was unclear and was not coded.

Eleven of the 26 interview respondents offered replies with multiple themes when requested to describe what characteristics or factors of Quest had been most important in determining their schools' initial involvement in the network. The remainder offered replies with one theme. Nine respondents indicated that they had little or no information about Quest as their schools became involved and therefore could not offer definitive analyses of what about Quest encouraged their schools' participation. (Nonetheless, four of these respondents attempted to guess what Quest characteristics had been important.)

Five responses indicated that their schools' first involvement with Quest had been a trial run, and all five reported that their schools had assessed their experiences positively. Three of these, however, added that they had encountered "nothing new," as one put it, at their schools' first Quest rally. The relevance of Quest to their schools was noted by four participants as significant to their schools' first association with the project. Three replies each suggested the importance of networking opportunities, prior knowledge of AEL's services, and the opportunity to explore what Quest had to offer. Two respondents replied that Quest's non-directive philosophy had been important to their schools' initial engagement. One such respondent reported that she "liked the 'design-your-own' aspect" of Quest. Two responses each indicated the significance of the principals' initiation of involvement and of the opportunities for acquiring new information through Quest. One respondent suggested Quest processes had been important, while another noted the importance of opportunities for team building offered by the network. One reply was unclear and remained uncoded.

Nineteen of the 26 respondents provided replies with multiple themes when asked to identify what school factors had hindered or helped their schools' sustained involvement in Quest. More, and more lengthy, responses were offered concerning impediments to schools' continued participation than were offered concerning factors facilitating long-term involvement. In other

words, respondents had more to report about impediments than about encouragement of their schools' involvement.

In terms of hindrances to ongoing participation in Quest, 12 replies mentioned the presence of competing priorities at their schools. As one participant said, "[We're] completely overcommitted. The county has grant money with which they've started summer academics, and weekend and evening programs. [We have] no time at all. [There is] a shortage of people to do the work; many jobs have been combined." Similarly, a principal reported, "[I] am overwhelmed when I get back from meetings. [There are] so many things in a high school that require my attention . . . . I work 10-14 hours per day." One respondent listed the many programs at her school for which staff had assumed responsibility: "Lots of things, federal grants . . . before-school program, after-school program, tutoring program . . . CCLC grant . . . summer academy . . . community classes. . . . [We're] just burning out."

Eight replies indicated that a lack of administrative support impeded their schools' continued involvement in Quest. Two of these mentioned lack of central office support; the remainder pertained to the paucity of building-level administrative support. Six responses indicated that a lack of funding to attend Quest functions hindered their continued participation; four of these responses also contained the theme concerning lack of administrative support. One such participant said, "Money. We'd keep going if we didn't have to beg for it from the principal." Six replies suggested that a lack of time discouraged their schools' involvement. Four responses each indicated that a particularly difficult school year and a faculty reluctant to participate in Quest had hindered their schools' sustained association with the project. Two respondents reported that difficulties in acquiring substitute coverage for classes while they attended network gatherings had inhibited their schools' participation. School communication problems, lack of parent and community involvement in Quest, and faculty confusion about the relevance of Quest to their school were identified by one respondent each as impediments. One respondent reported that nothing at her school had hindered their involvement in the network.

Two replies each suggested that principal support and the relevance of Quest to the school had been important to their schools' ongoing participation. The adequacy of Quest communications, sharing ideas, and dedication of Quest team members were cited by one participant each as encouraging their schools' involvement.

Again, when asked what characteristics or factors of Quest inhibited or encouraged their schools' continued participation, more responses were offered concerning impediments. (Nonetheless, nine respondents indicated that nothing about Quest itself had hindered their participation, although three of these went on to mention that attendance at project events did require funding, which was a concern. A fourth participant reporting that nothing about Quest impeded involvement later noted that the relevance of the network to her school was ambiguous.) Seven respondents each cited competing priorities, lack of time, and funding as hindrances to their schools' continued involvement. Three replies suggested that the relevance of Quest to their schools was unclear. Similarly, one respondent said, "[My school is] just not the type of school that's going to

be involved." Two participants reported that they felt a sense of disjuncture after having missed one Quest rally: "If you missed a meeting, [it] was hard to go back. [You] felt you had missed out," as one phrased it. The other suggested that Quest meetings focus on one theme per year. Traveling long distances to attend project meetings was an impediment to two respondents. Reluctant faculty and scheduling of events were hindrances to one respondent each. It should be noted that not all of the replies address characteristics of Quest itself, instead referring to school issues.

Eleven respondents reported that characteristics of Quest had encouraged their schools' ongoing involvement in the network, one of whom provided an answer containing two themes. Seven responses indicated generically that Quest was "beneficial" or "wonderful," for instance. Two responses each suggested that the informative and frequent communications from Quest staff and the value of Quest as an information resource supported their schools' sustained participation. One reply noted that the project's focus on parent and community involvement had encouraged her schools' continued participation.

Table 2
Important Factors Influencing Quest Involvement: Summary of Most Frequently Mentioned Interview Themes

Theme	Initial	Theme	Sustained
Potential relevance of Quest	8	Competing priorities	12
Apparent relevance of Quest	7	Lack of administrative support	8
Building-level administrative support	5	Lack of funding	6
District office support	3	Lack of time	6

Survey Findings

Study participants were asked to complete the Quest Engagement Survey (see Appendix D) on which they were to rate the level of importance of 24 variables to, first, their schools' initial involvement with Quest, and second, their schools' sustained involvement with the project. Ratings for initial and sustained involvement were treated as separate variables, for a total of 48 variables. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of each factor using a 5-point Likert-type scale. Anchor points on the scale were 1 (*very unimportant*) and 5 (*very important*), and response options included a *don't know* reply.

Fifty-eight surveys were completed and returned. Elementary school respondents comprised 33 of the total and high school respondents 25. Eleven respondents hailed from schools categorized as least engaged, 22 from moderately engaged schools, and 25 from highly engaged schools.

Internal consistency reliabilities of the variables concerning initial and sustained involvement were calculated separately using Conbach's alpha. With an alpha coefficient of .94, the variables addressing initial involvement of schools in the Quest network have sufficient internal consistency reliability. Likewise, with an alpha coefficient of .89, the variables concerning schools' sustained participation in Quest also possess satisfactory internal consistency reliability.

As presented in Table 2, ratings of the importance of all but one factor were higher for schools' sustained involvement than they were for initial involvement. Only the importance of the central office staff's influence became less important for sustained involvement, although the difference in ratings is only .04 points on the 5-point scale (mean for initial involvement = 3.20, mean for sustained involvement = 3.16).

Mean ratings revealed that most important to schools' initial involvement in Quest were personal beliefs about education and change (4.41, SD .86), the vision for learning in the schools (4.22, SD 1.09), and the level of communication within their schools (3.96, SD 1.03). Personal beliefs about education and change continued to be rated as most important to schools' involvement in Quest over time, with a mean of 4.61 (SD .68). Also rated as most important to sustained participation in the project were the relevance of Quest to the school (4.42, SD .81) and ways in which the project supports school improvement (4.40, SD .82).

T-tests were conducted in order to explore whether differences in mean ratings of the importance of factors to schools' initial and sustained involvement in Quest were due to actual differences between the groups under investigation or were due to sampling error. Because of the exploratory nature of the study, two-tailed *t* tests were used: Quest staff did not have hypotheses concerning the directionality of differences.

It should be noted that the assumptions of the statistical test were violated in this study. The sample was not random, nor was it assumed that the data were drawn from a normally distributed population or that the samples had homogenous variances. Phillips (1982) contends, however, that "since those assumptions now appear to be far less important than originally thought, the recent trend toward increasing use of distribution-free tests is currently being reversed" (p. 139). Likewise, Glass and Hopkins (1984) report research suggesting that violation of the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance has little impact upon the robustness of *t* tests. Nonetheless, all findings should be interpreted with caution, given that the samples in the study are not random.

Table 3
Descriptive and Inferential Survey Statistics

Factor influencing involvement in Quest	Involvement	*N*	Mean	SD	*t* Value	df	Prob.
Amount of time needed to attend events	Initial Sustained	53 53	3.83 4.19	1.12 .94	3.219	52	.002*
Amount of time to do improvement work at school	Initial Sustained	52 52	3.88 4.19	1.04 .86	2.472	51	.017

Factor influencing involvement in Quest	Involvement	*N*	Mean	SD	*t* Value	df	Prob.
Amount of time available for professional development	Initial Sustained	53 53	3.77 3.98	1.10 1.12	1.996	52	.055
Ability to get substitute coverage	Initial Sustained	49 49	3.39 3.84	1.41 1.31	3.278	48	.002*
Scheduling	Initial Sustained	51 51	3.45 3.84	1.32 1.25	3.492	50	.001*
Availability of funding to attend events	Initial Sustained	51 51	3.82 4.29	1.31 1.08	3.273	50	.002*
Level of communication within the school	Initial Sustained	52 52	3.96 4.15	1.03 .89	1.939	51	.058
Legacy of prior reform efforts	Initial Sustained	47 47	3.68 3.89	1.45 1.27	1.810	46	.077
Vision of building-level leaders	Initial Sustained	51 51	3.78 4.22	1.21 .94	2.712	50	.009*
Turnover in building-level leadership	Initial Sustained	45 45	3.22 3.29	1.40 1.46	.621	44	.538
Vision for learning in the school	Initial Sustained	54 54	4.22 4.31	1.09 1.02	.711	53	.480
Influence of central office	Initial Sustained	50 50	3.20 3.16	1.50 1.40	.252	49	.802
Schoolwide consensus for involvement	Initial Sustained	54 54	3.13 3.69	1.29 1.13	3.471	53	.001*
Amount of information received concerning the Quest network	Initial Sustained	50 50	3.60 4.18	1.26 .90	2.868	49	.006*
Relevance of Quest to the school	Initial Sustained	50 50	3.94 4.42	1.10 .81	3.344	49	.002*
Personal beliefs about education and change	Initial Sustained	54 54	4.41 4.61	.86 .68	2.284	53	.026
Schoolwide resistance to change	Initial Sustained	50 50	3.58 3.86	1.16 1.14	2.137	49	.038
Match between school and network goals	Initial Sustained	46 46	3.93 4.28	1.08 .89	3.341	45	.002*
Math between school and network beliefs	Initial Sustained	46 46	3.89 4.30	1.14 .92	3.367	45	.002*
How Quest was introduced	Initial Sustained	53 53	3.43 3.72	1.17 1.13	1.766	52	.083

Factor influencing involvement in Quest	Involvement	*N*	Mean	SD	*t* Value	df	Prob.
How Quest supports school improvement (rallies, site visits, etc.)	Initial Sustained	53 53	3.81 4.40	1.19 .82	3.648	52	.001*
Quest proceses	Initial Sustained	48 48	3.54 4.23	1.20 .93	4.352	47	.000*
How Quest ties in with accountability to your district	Initial Sustained	42 42	3.38 3.62	1.25 1.27	1.880	41	.067
How Quest ties in with accountability to your state department of education	Initial Sustained	42 42	3.31 3.52	1.37 1.38	2.036	41	.048

* Statistically significant at the .01 level.

Twelve statistically significant differences were located using the *t* test and a probability level of .01. The amount of time needed to attend project events was more important to sustained than initial participation, with a *t* value of 3.219, statistically significant at the .01 level. Also statistically significantly more important to sustained involvement in Quest were the ability to get substitute coverage (*t* value of 3.278), scheduling (*t* value of 3.492), and the availability of funding to support attendance at project events (*t* value of 3.273). School concerns, such as the vision of building-level leaders (*t* value of 2.712) and schoolwide consensus for involvement in Quest (*t* value of 3.471), were also more important to participation in the project over time. Interestingly, the amount of information participants received about Quest was more important to continued participation (*t* value of 2.868).

Quest structures and the relevance of the project to school goals and perspectives also appeared to be more significant to sustained than initial participation. The relevance of Quest to the school (*t* value of 3.344), the match between school and network goals (*t* value of 3.341), and the match between school and network beliefs (*t* value of 3.367) were more important to continued than beginning involvement. Also more important to schools' ongoing participation in the network were the ways Quest supports school improvement (*t* value of 3.643), via site visits and rallies, for instance, and Quest processes (*t* value of 4.352).

Statistical significance alone, however, does not indicate the meaningfulness of findings; rather, it indicates the rareness of findings. The calculation of effect size allows the conversion of statistically significant results into the standard deviation metric, providing a better analysis of practical significance. Thus, the effect size was calculated to estimate the practical significance of differences in ratings of the importance of various factors to initial and sustained participation in Quest expressed in standard deviation units.

Effect sizes ranged from a low of $d = .30$ to a high of $d = .64$. Using Cohen's (1988) conventions for determining the magnitude of effect sizes, most statistics for this study would be considered small. These included scheduling ($d = .30$), substitute coverage ($d = .33$), time to attend project events ($d = .35$), match between school and network goals ($d = .35$), match between school and network beliefs ($d = .40$), vision of building-level leaders ($d = .41$), and schoolwide consensus

for involvement in the project (d = .46). The remaining effect sizes could be characterized as moderate: relevance of the project to the school (d = .50), the amount of information received about Quest (d = .53), how Quest supports school improvement (d = .58), and Quest processes (d = .64).

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Focus group, interview, and survey data reveal somewhat different accounts of what factors Quest respondents thought had been most important to their schools' initial and continued involvement in the network. Survey responses indicate that personal beliefs about education and change were most significant to both beginning and ongoing participation. Focus group and individual interviews, on the other hand, suggest that building-level administrative support for participation had been most important to both initial and sustained involvement. The relevance of Quest to the school was deemed by focus group and interview respondents among the most important factors contributing to initial participation. Such relevance was also cited by focus group and survey respondents as among the most significant factors contributing to ongoing involvement in the project.

In general, whereas focus group and interview data suggest that the factors influencing initial and sustained Quest participation retain similar levels of importance, survey data reveal otherwise. According to survey respondents, all factors included in the instrument were of greater importance to schools' continued involvement in the network. Moreover, 12 of the 24 listed factors were rated as more important to sustained participation at statistically significant levels, although effect sizes for most indicate that such differences may have relatively little practical significance.

According to Webster's, relevance is "1. a: relation to the matter at hand. b. practical and esp. social applicability. 2. the ability (as of an information retrieval system) to retrieve material that satisfies the needs of the user." Interestingly, the statistically significant factor with the largest, though nonetheless moderate, effect size concerns specific Quest processes, such as the Protocol process and Data in a Day. And although relevance was reported and rated across study protocols to be among the factors most important to initial and sustained network participation, it could be argued that the extent to which specific Quest processes were rated as having becoming more important to ongoing involvement is a component of relevance, particularly if the last two definitions of relevance are applied.

Initial and sustained participation in a school improvement effort such as Quest, then, might arguably be most influenced by a convergence of personal factors (beliefs about education and change), school supports or constraints (building-level administrative contributions), and the extent of project applicability to the school (relevance). In addition, the ways in which particular characteristics, resources, or tools provided by the improvement effort bolster its relevance to participating schools becomes more important to their ongoing involvement.

Despite the limitations of this study, the findings presented here suggest several strategies organizations supporting school improvement might enact to strengthen their work. For instance, such efforts may want to consider ongoing needs assessment as a means to target support and assistance that remains relevant to participating schools. Such a strategy presupposes that these organizations do not believe that one configuration of school reform will address the needs of all schools; rather, ongoing needs assessment sensitive to schools' evolving concerns necessitates a non-prescriptive and flexible approach to school improvement. Moreover, a change agent attuned to schools' needs may also be more likely to respect their skepticism of just *any* proposed change.

Another strategy the findings of this study suggest involves the education of school staffs in the history of and research on school change. Although such discussions may have occurred pre-service, the grounding of one's ongoing personal and professional lives in the broader context of education and change may stimulate one's attention to useful change (and critique of damaging or counterproductive change). Taken further, such studies may provide school staff with the otherwise rare opportunity to explore and articulate their theoretical commitments, in which any school improvement efforts undertaken later might be grounded.

The issue of administrative support for involvement in school improvement efforts remains complicated–by the nature of reform initiatives, policy, administrative structures, competing demands on school leaders, let alone issues of personnel and personality. This study sheds little light on means by which to garner building-level administrative support; rather, it underscores the ways school leaders are positioned to provide (or withhold) moral and logistical support for improvement efforts. One strategy for inspiring administrative support, used by Quest staff, is the formation of school teams, with teacher, parent, student, and administrator membership. Principals may also be more inclined to support their staffs' participation in improvement work if it is aligned with other mandates or initiatives.

Distilled, however, the moral of this study is that sustaining improvement work requires more commitment, energy, and resources than does the initial impetus to become involved with such work. While this is hardly surprising, organizations undertaking to support school reform may want to attend in particular to the relevance of their efforts and resources to participating schools *as reform continues*.

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APPENDIX A:

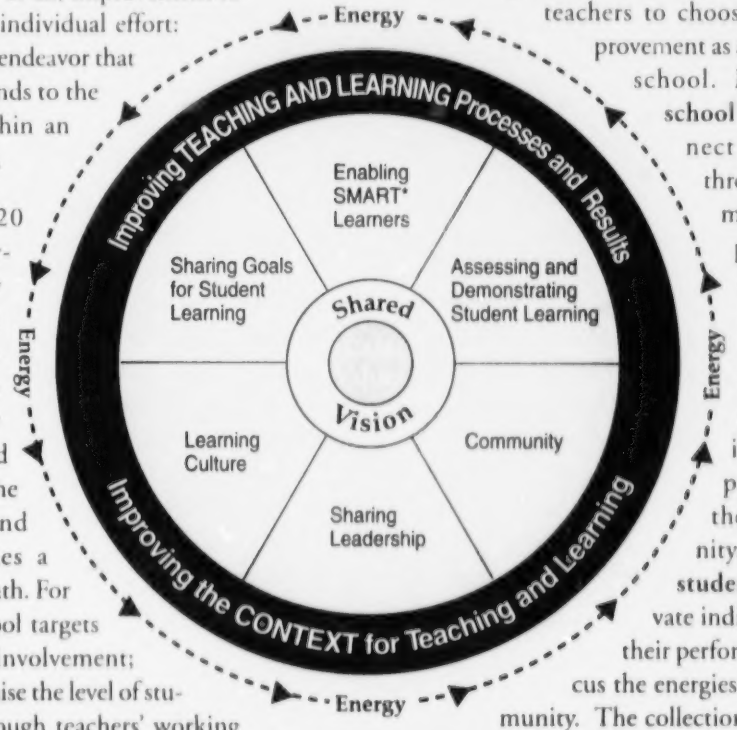
Quest Brochure and Framework for Continuous School Improvement

Quest for Quality Learning Communities
A Program for Continuous School Improvement

School improvement is challenging work; to be effective, it must be continuous. Improvement is not a single act or program; it is a process of always wanting to learn more about how better to help **all** students achieve at higher levels. Improvement is visionary; it involves risk-taking, uncertainty, and a rejection of "doing what we've always done." Most of all, improvement requires more than individual effort: it is a collaborative endeavor that engages and responds to the diverse voices within an entire community.

Teams from 20 schools in a four-state region now collaborate with staff from the Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) to study and learn together in the Quest project, and each school takes a slightly different path. For example, one school targets increased parent involvement; another hopes to raise the level of student thinking through teachers' working together and coaching one another; a high school improves teaching by listening to what students say about how they learn best; other schools focus on specific curriculum areas such as writing or science education.

The Quest framework unifies their thinking about school improvement. These **core values** offer a blueprint for continuous progress: ongoing questioning of practice, high expectations for all, individual responsibility for better performance, collegial sharing and support, and thoughtful reflection on practice.



Stemming from these values is a clearly defined **vision** of student excellence that is shared by all members of the school community. A strong **learning culture** encourages both students and teachers to choose continuous improvement as a way of life in their school. Members of the **school community** connect to one another through a shared commitment to improved learning conditions for all. **Shared leadership** encourages and enables everyone to assume responsibility for making a positive impact on the school community. **Shared goals for student learning** motivate individuals to improve their performance and help focus the energies of the entire community. The collection, analysis, and **use of student assessment data** sustains continuous improvement, providing a measure of the effectiveness of the community's efforts. **SMART** learners are Successful, Motivated, Autonomous, Responsible, and Thoughtful. Fully equipped to become lifelong learners, they are ready for life and work in the 21st century. In short, continuous improvement spawns the **energy** and excitement necessary to transform a collection of individuals into a true learning community.

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Goals of the Quest Project

1. ***Connect* with colleagues.** By serving on a Quest leadership team, participants connect with others on their school team, forming bonds that enhance working relationships. In addition, Quest teams connect with teams from other schools, districts, and states, allowing everyone to learn from others' experiences. A listserv, inquiry@ael.org, facilitates connections across the network.

2. ***Create* a learning community.** Teams become part of the Quest network learning community with the expectation of recreating this experience in their own community.

3. ***Connect* with concepts and stories related to continuous school improvement.** At Quest rallies, the Quest framework is a source of study, dialogue, and sharing among teams.

4. ***Create* personal and shared meaning.** The Quest network places a high value on processes such as reflection and dialogue, which lead to deeper understandings of continuous improvement.

5. ***Commit* to continue learning with this community.** Quest schools have made a three-year commitment to study and learn together, with a focus on improving student achievement.

What is a learning community? "Learning communities are essentially communities of inquirers . . . sustained by a continued commitment to share this journey of exploration with one another on matters people care deeply about" (Ryan, 1995).

Peter Senge et al. (1994) write that a learning organization "is a place where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, . . . and where people are continually learning how to learn together."

6. ***Commit* to continue the Quest back home.** The "rubber hits the road" at schools, not at Quest events. AEL helps school teams take their learnings home and apply them for the benefit of students. Site visits, called Co-Ventures in Learning, provide opportunities for AEL staff to visit each school, in order to better understand the context of that school's efforts, and tailor assistance to the school's needs.

The Quest project hopes to achieve results at three different levels:

- For individuals, sharing leadership on a Quest team leads to more reflective practice and renewed understanding of the concepts that support continuous improvement.
- For schools, Quest will provide motivation and support for ongoing and/or new school-based initiatives to improve teaching and learning.
- For the Quest network of schools, our collaborative learning and research will yield stories, insights, processes, and products—all of which will be helpful to the broader educational community.

References

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